northern tribes and wishes me to accompany him as an initiate warrior. My duty to the family is fulfilled--the woman is pregnant--and I am eager to go. The question is, how will you accompany me?"

"How?" A bitterness he could not totally hide tinged Kirk's voice. "As your slave, of course, haven't I just proved that?"

"Is that how it seemed to you? Jim, I thought it was rather the willing submission of a lover. Never before have I questioned the customs of my world. There have always been masters and slaves. But I question those customs now."

"Slavery, Spock? Or only slavery for me?"

"I do not know." The Vulcan's tone was thoughtful. "It is such a new thought for me to question at all.... I do know that the knowledge that you are a slave is too painful to bear. And I know, too, that for you slavery is degrading. Though you love me, you feel shame each time I claim you as a master claims a slave, is it not so?"

"Yes," Kirk whispered. "I can't help it. I want--so much--to be yours by my own choice, and not because you have the right to take me. It tears me apart, Spock. I want to be with you, but I don't know if I can live like this...."

"I, too, want more." Spock's voice was sudenly intense. "You are more, much more, than a mere pleasure slave. If it were possible I would free you and claim you as my legal mate, but that can never be. No slave may be freed on Vulcan, and an uncollared alien becomes the property of whoever cares to claim him. You would be taken the first time I let you out of my sight.

"So you must remain my slave, but there are several choices even then. First is that you remain as you are, a piece of valuable property, part of my estate if I am killed, to be inherited by my heirs. As neither my father nor my son have any use for a male pleasure slave, you would undoubtedly be sold for another's bed. Or, I can declare you my favorite. As such you will be slain on my death and burned with me to serve me in the after-life."

"I think," Kirk said quietly, "that you wish to offer me a third choice."

"I do, and it is this. I have, in common with many Vulcans, the ability to touch the mind of another. Today I tried it with you, and succeeded. I forbade you to achieve release and you could not. There is an--oath--sworn between mated warriors who have this ability to link minds--an oath which binds them so irrevocably that one cannot survive the death of the other. They are as one spirit in two bodies. Jim, through I must treat you still as a slave, I would swear this oath with you. The bond is unbreakable, and exclusive. I will never be able to take another mate, though no one must ever know why."

"Ashamed of me, Spock?" Kirk kept his voice steady with an effort.

"No, Jim! Never that! You must believe me." Spock took Kirk's face between his hands again. "But we must live in this world as it is, not as we wish it to be. If it were possible I would go to my father now, claim you before the alter of my ancestors, and hold you in the face of all Vulcan." The dark eyes grew anquished. "But that can never be. To bond with a slave is unthinkable. If it becomes know, I will be disgraced, you will be taken from me.... I dare not think what would become of you. Possessiveness, even a degree of affection, is tolerated towards a slave, love is not. The bonding, should you consent to it, must be concealed from all."

"Spock..." Kirk reached up to touch the hand that rested on his cheek. "You said that to bond with a slave was unthinkable. You've been used to slaves all your life. Can you change now? Will it be possible for you to think of me, and to treat me, as your equal."

"Jim, I do not know." The dark eyes met his with open candour. "I know only that I want to try and there is this--as the bonding intensifies, as we grow closer in mind and spirit, it will be impossible for one of us willingly to hurt the other. If I forget, if I cause you shame or sorrow--those feelings will be reflected back to me." The Vulcan hesitated for a moment, then continued. "I must remind you again that since the bonding must be secret, you must in public act the part of the petted, indulged slave and I that of the master. A few liberties may be permitted in the presence of friends, but if either of us forget our roles, the consequences will be disasterous. Before you answer, consider well the part you must play."

"You've been honest with me." Kirk lowered his eyes to gain a moment's respite, though he already knew the only answer he could make. When he looked up again the glow in his golden eyes made the Vulcan catch his breath in wonder. "Spock, I love you. And for the rest--I trust your word."

"Then you will bond with me?"

"I will."

Spock's shoulders sagged with relief. "I was not sure--after your initiation to my world--that you could trust me so far." His voice grew speculative. "And there are other worlds than Vulcan, where custom may not be so rigid. Perhaps one day, when I have made my name as a warrior, we may seek a post as mercenaries where we may be together without fear."

"You'd give up your world for me?"

"You have lost yours. It would be one sorrow we could share." Trailing his fingers down Kirk's throat, Spock brushed against the heavy metal collar, and he frowned. "This must go. You must be collared, but it will be in gold, as a sign of my love for you. Jim...kiss me?"

It was a request, not an order, and one Kirk was glad to grant. He stood up and rested one knee on the couch, sliding one hand through the waves of Spock's hair to the back of his head. With the other hand he reached for Spock's forearm and drew it around his waist. He leaned down, feeling the Vulcan's erect penis press against his thigh. Spock's hands reached to cup his buttocks, and for a moment he remained still, his lips poised above Spock's partly open mouth. His tongue flicked, tracing the outline of the trembling lips, then he took the lower one between his teeth and nipped it gently.

Spock gasped and pulled away, his eyes puzzled. Kirk laughed, entangled his fingers in the soft hair and drew him back into position.

"Patience!" he whispered softly and bent to claim the eager mouth again. This time he slipped his tongue between Spock's lips, then withdrew it even as the Vulcan sought to capture it with his